



Planet of Slums?

Today's instalment is Mike Davis' brilliant and celebrated essay, "Planet of Slums", published in 2004 and later made into a book. It is appropriate to have it here, because of its early allusion to Engels' "Condition of the Working Class in England" (*"when the young Engels first ventured onto the mean streets of Manchester"*), and because of Davis's constant references back to what he says were the "predictions" of "classical Marxism".

Davis starts by announcing the fact that at some point between 2004 and now, the world would change forever when, for the first time, the number of human beings living in

cities would exceed those remaining in the rural areas.

The world moved from being majority-rural to being majority-urban. It is good that Davis reminds us of this fact. The newspapers probably failed to notice it. Says Davis, in his opening summary:

“In 1950 there were 86 cities in the world with a population over one million; today there are 400, and by 2015, there will be at least 550. Cities, indeed, have absorbed nearly two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950 and are currently growing by a million babies and migrants each week. The present urban population (3.2 billion) is larger than the total population of the world in 1960. The global countryside, meanwhile, has reached its maximum population (3.2 billion) and will begin to shrink after 2020. As a result, cities will account for all future world population growth, which is expected to peak at about 10 billion in 2050.”

The cities that soaked up all the people were of different types, according to Davis. Using Marx's and Engels' foundational work as his polemical foil, Davis implies that Engels foretold a future of “Manchester Capitalism”, whereas, Davis says, the most massive cities and conurbations of today exhibit features that contradict Engels' and Marx's “predictions”.

Davis is trying to argue that the urbanisation that Engels described in his pioneering work, no longer applies. Perhaps

he is trying to argue that the class struggle no longer applies, or has been cancelled.

Davis is undoubtedly wrong in this overall argument of his, but he does succeed in producing a stimulating focus on urbanism, and in highlighting a few facts, as he had previously done with his book “City of Quartz”, a class-based analysis of town planning in Los Angeles, California, USA.

Here are three Mike Davis quotes. The first two are from this essay:

“Classical social theory from Marx to Weber, of course, believed that the great cities of the future would follow in the industrializing footsteps of Manchester, Berlin and Chicago.”

“The global growth of a vast informal proletariat, moreover, is a wholly original structural development unforeseen by either classical Marxism or modernization pundits.”

And the third from a separate [interview](#) (in “Space and Culture”):

“Neither classical Marxism, nor any other variety of classical social theory or neoliberal economics, ever predicted that such a large fraction of humanity would live in cities and yet basically outside all the formal institutions of the world economy.”

This is actually a literary fraud on Davis' part, because Marx and Engels were never in the prediction business. It is true that they sought to understand the world and made many observations about it, but "the point is to change it", as Marx noted in the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach.

A conception of the world as developing by itself in a certain direction, without the help of political consciousness and political agency, is something that has always been denounced by "classical" Marxists. Lenin called it "economism". The inadequacy of "economism" is the reason why the vanguard Party is a necessity.

So Davis is wrong about Marx and the Marxists. Whether he is wrong in other respects is worth examining and debating.

- The above serves to introduce the original reading-text: Mike Davis's 2004 "[Planet of Slums](#)"
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